

VZCZCXRO0583  
RR RUEHIK  
DE RUEHMD #1004/01 2880905  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 150905Z OCT 09  
FM AMEMBASSY MADRID  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1328  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLA/AMCONSUL BARCELONA 4149  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RUEILB/NCTC WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MADRID 001004

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

EUR/WE FOR ALEX MCKNIGHT AND STACIE ZERDECKI

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: PGOV SP PINS  
SUBJECT: SPAIN: BASQUE REGION WILL NOT CLOSE ITS NEW YORK OFFICE

REF: A. MADRID 499  
¶B. 08 MADRID 1088

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¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Senior Basque officials within the Office of the Lehendakari (regional premier or U.S Governor equivalent) have indicated that - contrary to Spanish press reporting in early September - the regional government under new Socialist (PSE) Lehendakari Patxi Lopez (Ref A) will not be closing down all of its overseas "delegations" and specifically stressed that the Basque office in New York City will remain open. These offices - not to be confused with the trade development offices run by the Sociedad Para la Promocion y Reconversion Industrial, a public society known as SPRI (Ref B) - have been and remain controversial for their alleged role as de facto "Embassies" for the Basque Country. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (SBU) Andoni Unzalu, Secretary General for Communications and a key Lopez political adviser, Guillermo Echenique, Secretary General for Foreign Relations, and Irune Aguirrezzabal, Director of Foreign Relations, on September 9 explained to POLOFF that the regional government would submit a report in mid-September evaluating the role and number of the offices abroad and indicated that some offices may be closed to achieve financial efficiencies during this time of economic crisis. These officials - who prefer to call these offices "delegations" - stated that the role of the delegations will be revised to focus more on commerce and Basque cultural issues and that these offices will begin to work more closely with the Embassies in those countries. They also indicated that the Lopez Administration had decided that the names of the offices would be renamed as Delegations of the Basque Country, in which the Spanish "Pais Vasco" rather than the Basque-language "Euskadi" will be used to refer to the Basque Country. Idoia Mendia, spokeswoman for the regional government, on September 10 told POLOFF that, under Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) rule (1980-2009), the delegations were challenging the authority of the Spanish central government.

¶13. (SBU) These officials described New York City as "a fundamental market" and said that it, along with the Basque office in Brussels, would not be closed. (COMMENT: Spain has both a Consular office and its Permanent Mission to the UN in New York City. END COMMENT) The New York office - which has a staff of three - currently is up and running and is planning an expo on Basque immigration to take place on Long Island in February, 2010. The naming of a new director is pending and the formal inauguration of the delegation office in New York is planned for the first quarter of 2010. Aguirrezzabal planned to visit the New York office in

September 2009 while she was in the United States as part of the Department of State's International Visitor Leadership program.

//DECIDEDLY MIXED REACTION FROM OTHER PARTIES//

¶4. (SBU) The PNV, which remains the largest party in the regional parliament despite having lost power following the March 2009 regional election, categorically rules out supporting any reduction in the number of Basque offices abroad, which the party considers one of the "fundamental" points of its accomplishments during the last 20 years in office. Inaki Goikoetxeta, the PNV's pointman of foreign policy issues, on September 8 asserted to POLOFF that these "delegations" emphasize cultural, sports and folkloric aspects of the Basque people and have "nothing to do with politics." He argued that the Basque culture transcends politics and derided as a "a pure lie" any assertion that the overseas offices were used to proselytize separatist policies to the Basque diaspora.

¶5. (SBU) Members of the conservative Popular Party's (PP) Basque wing - the de facto junior partner in the Basque regional government - blast the existence of Basque offices around the world as "ridiculous." In a meeting with POLOFF on September 9, Anton Damborenea, President of the PP in the Basque province of Vizcaya, and Leopoldo Barreda, spokesman for the PP caucus in the regional parliament, asserted that the PNV opened these "Embassies" to gain publicity for the PNV's policy of seeking increased self-determination and to raise money in sympathetic countries for the PNV's policies. The PP argued that the existence of these Basque "embassies" conflicts with the activities and representation of Spanish embassies. The PP officials further alleged that - an estimated annual cost of roughly USD \$7 million - these

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offices are "a waste of money." The PP officials further derided the Lopez administration's interest in keeping these overseas offices open as an opportunity to reward political cronies with cushy "Ambassadorships" overseas at taxpayer expense.

CHACON